

Naval investigators share their techniques for thawing out some of the coldest cases

The Daily News, Jacksonville, N.C.

December 18, 2005

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Norma Small was interviewed by Naval Criminal Investigative Service 11 times after her husband, Mervin "Sonny" Grotton, was killed in December 1983.

Grotton, 46, a Navy petty officer stationed in Rhode Island, was gunned down outside his Belfast, Maine, home. Authorities suspected Small was behind the homicide, but proving it was another story.

"She never gave up anything," said NCIS special agent Jeff Morrow, who was one of the investigators in the case. "She never implicated herself."

Investigators ran down every lead but couldn't make an arrest. For almost 20 years, it was considered a cold case. But in 2002, the Sonny Grotton homicide joined the ranks with 42 other NCIS cases that were solved by the NCIS Cold Case Homicide Unit.

Morrow now uses the Grotton murder as a tool for teaching other law enforcement officers techniques to help solve cold cases. He and several other agents spent three days at Camp Lejeune hosting a cold case homicide training seminar for several detectives from the Onslow County Sheriff's Department, the Jacksonville Police Department and close to 100 law enforcement officers from North Carolina and South Carolina.

Those who attended heard several case studies as well as information on the methodology that NCIS uses to resolve a cold case.

It took NCIS almost 20 years to charge Small for Grotton's murder. She was convicted in 2002 and is serving 70 years in prison. Joel Fuller, the man she hired to kill her husband, was acquitted in 2003, but he was already serving a life sentence for another crime.

Boyd Smith of Maine was also charged and acquitted. He was allegedly pressured by Small to get in contact with someone to kill her husband.

NCIS used an undercover agent to help gather evidence to solve the case. Small, who had been a roadblock during the initial investigation, eventually provided information to the undercover agent, which investigators were able to use during follow-up interviews.

It was a case that taught NCIS a lot, said Morrow, who outlined all that agents learned from it.

"You need to get to know your cases very well," Morrow said. "Analyze what pieces you have and what you need to get to complete the puzzle."

Morrow recommended that officers develop strategies, collaborate and discuss all the evidence thoroughly with other agents and use a variety of investigative resources.

"Think conventional and non-traditional investigative techniques," Morrow said.